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Introduction to the Aztec economic world

In the modern world, international commerce provides more links between the people of different nations than *all* the political, religious, and humanitarian delegations combined. Every day, millions of goods are produced, shipped, bought, and sold by over seven billion people around the world. People pay little attention to where these goods come from. Instead, they simply expect them to appear on the shelves of their local grocery stores or in the public marketplace. The ingredients for even a simple lunch can come from many different places around the world, the result of modern commercial networks and how efficiently they mobilize the products we consume. These networks, of course, are not new. The movement of resources from producers to consumers in rural and urban settings has been an indispensable part of large-scale societies throughout human history. Two important questions for the study of ancient economy, of course, are what types of goods moved through regional networks during preindustrial times, and in what volume?

The way goods are transferred from producers to consumers takes many different forms. In the modern world, goods and money move through multiple channels as wages, gifts, grants, and taxes to name a few, each representing a different sphere of distribution and exchange. The same was true for the distant past; goods and resources moved through multiple economic and social channels in large-scale ancient societies. One of the challenges of social historians is to reconstruct the economic organization of ancient societies where information is limited or of uneven quality. As societies grew in size the goods needed to provision them often had to move over further and further distances. One of the solutions to this problem in many places around the world was the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-14277-0 - The Aztec Economic World: Merchants and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica

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Excerpt

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appearance of merchants and merchant groups who were the agents that bridged the gap between producers and consumers.

The merchant, whether male or female, is an exchange and transportation specialist. They procure goods or resources and move them over space to their final consumers. Whether merchants link producers directly with consumers or form part of a network through which consumables flow is simply a matter of scale. Their function remains the same: they provide a provisioning function from which they obtain a portion of their livelihood.

This book is about the indigenous merchants and commercial behavior found in prehispanic Mexico at the moment of Spanish contact. When Hernando Cortés landed his expeditionary force of 600 men on the coast of Veracruz, Mexico in 1519 he expected to find a native population organized as relatively small *cacicazgos* or chiefdom societies like those encountered on Hispaniola and elsewhere throughout the Caribbean. Instead, he encountered the densely populated and powerful Aztec empire that was organized for conquest at a continental scale. What ensued was one of the great adventure stories of all time. Cortés and his intrepid force of Spaniards conquered the Aztecs in a two-year period through a series of both planned and unplanned events. Conflict, disease, and political intrigue were the tools of the conquest and Cortés would never have defeated the Aztecs without the tens of thousands of soldiers provided by the Tlaxcalans and other indigenous native kingdoms that were long-standing enemies of the Aztecs.

The Spaniards marveled at the scale and structure of native societies. They were large, well-organized kingdoms with impressive urban centers and complex economies. Two dimensions of the Aztec economy especially impressed the Spanish conquistadors: the wealth of the Aztec tribute network and the size and richness of their indigenous marketplaces. While the tribute system maintained the Aztec state, the marketplaces supported a rich commercial society where the greater population bought and sold the staples of everyday life. These marketplaces were identical in function to the *suqs* and market bazaars that the conquistadors had seen in Spain and other parts of the Old World. What was different was their size. The Spanish were astonished by the number of people who frequented them, the variety of goods sold, and the well-ordered manner in which marketplaces operated. This amazement is captured in many of the first-hand accounts of the Tlatelolco marketplace in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (Cortés 1962; Díaz del Castillo 1956). Bernal Díaz del Castillo writes,

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When we arrived at the great market place, called Tlatelolco, we were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise that it contained, and at the good order and control that was maintained, for we had never seen such a thing before

(Díaz del Castillo 1956:215).

The Spanish understood commercial society. The Mediterranean world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was in the midst of a mercantile revolution. The Portuguese explorations in Africa, India, and Indonesia brought a multitude of new exotic products and riches into the market-places of the western Mediterranean. Many of the conquistadors were well traveled and they were not easily impressed by native institutions given their ethnocentric biases against non-Christian societies. It is within this context that their comments must be understood. While they had seen large markets at Salamanca and Cordoba, they were still impressed with the level of commercial activity found across the Mexican highlands.

This study explores the organization, scale, and complexity of indigenous commercial behavior across the Central and Southern Mexican highlands, an area I refer to as the Aztec economic world. The term Aztec is commonly used to refer to the Late Postclassic (AD 1200–1520) Nahua people of Central Mexico (Evans and Webster 2001:59) and I follow that convention here. The specific population that formed the core of the Aztec empire resided on the island of Tenochtitlan and referred to themselves as the Culhua-Mexica.¹ They are best known for the conquest of a large area of Mesoamerica and its integration into a tribute empire between AD 1428 and 1519 (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). This is the empire that Hernando Cortés and the Spanish conquistadors encountered in 1519 and which represents the greater part of the Aztec world. While many different ethnic groups² resided within the empire, they shared similar forms of domestic and institutional economic organization.

The Aztec empire covered an area of between 160,000 and 165,000 sq. km that extended from just south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to 150 km north of Mexico City, and from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific coast (Figure 1.2). The inception of the Aztec empire can be traced to the formation of the Triple Alliance in AD 1428 when the three city-states of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan came together to overthrow the rule of the Tepanec state. From that point on, these three city-states worked together to conquer and shape the tribute empire with the Aztecs playing an increasingly dominant role over its span of growth between AD 1428 and 1519. The empire was composed of many small independent or



FIGURE 1.1 Western Mesoamerica: Major communities and *altepeme* centers mentioned in the text

semi-independent city-states centered on a principal town or confederation of towns from which they derived their name. These small political entities were called *altepeme* (sing. *altepetl*) in the Nahuatl language and were the action entities for political and local economic interaction both before and after Aztec conquest.³ Examples of some of these *altepeme* polities include Cholula, Coixtlahuaca, Tenochtitlan, Tepeaca, and Texcoco to name a few (Figures 1.1 and 1.3).

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMERCE

The core of the Aztec empire was the central and southern Mexican highlands north and west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. I refer to the area west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as western Mesoamerica throughout this volume (Figure 1.1) to distinguish it from the greater region of Maya and related Mesoamerican cultures located further to the east. The Aztec empire extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts, incorporating environments extending from sea level to the tops of Mexico's highest

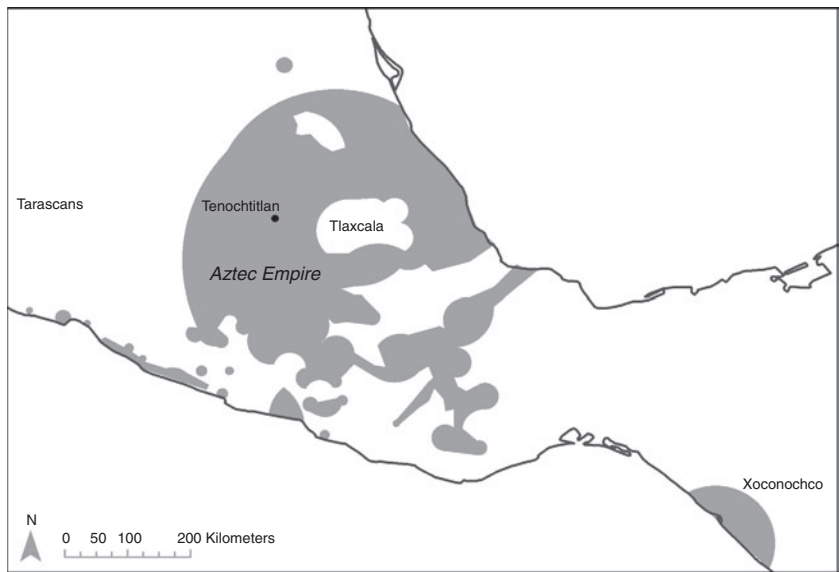


FIGURE 1.2 The Aztec world and empire

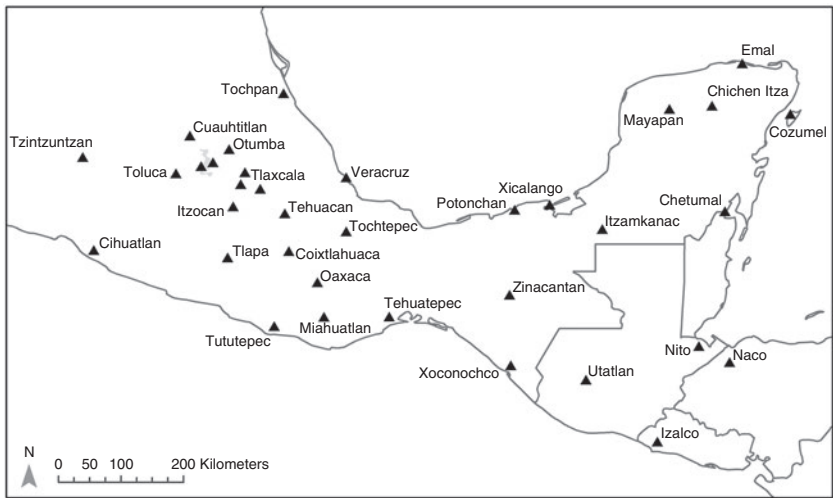


FIGURE 1.3 Major prehispanic and colonial communities in Mesoamerica

mountain peaks over 5,000 m in elevation.⁴ The highland core of the empire is a dissected environment of several large valley and basin areas (e.g. the Basin of Mexico and the Valleys of Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Toluca) separated by mountain ridges. Elevation differences within the

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FIGURE 1.4 Tierra Fria and Tierra Helada environment of the Iztaccihuatl volcano in Central Mexico

highlands have produced an environment that juxtaposes differing ecological zones in close proximity to one another. These differences are most noticeable during the rainy season when perennial flora spring to life.

Differences in elevation create a mosaic of five differing climatic-vegetation zones that define Mesoamerica's complex resource ecology. These are: 1) the Atlantic and Pacific coasts where marine resources including fish and salt are available; 2) the *tierra caliente* or hot lands below 1,000 m msl where tropical commodities such as fruits, cotton, cacao, and other tropical flora and fauna are found; 3) the frost-free *tierra templada* or temperate lands between 1,000 and 2,000 m msl that maintain an average temperature of around 60 degrees F. throughout the year and are well suited for agriculture; 4) the forested *tierra fria* or cold lands from 2,000–2,800 m msl where temperatures during the coldest months can drop below freezing creating problems for agriculture; and, 5) the *tierra helada* or frozen lands above 2,800 m msl which can receive snowfall during winter months and include the snow covered peaks of Mexico's highest mountains (Figure 1.4). Figure 1.5 illustrates the distribution of these climatic-vegetation zones across western Mesoamerica which represents the area between Lake Cuitzeo and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Figures 1.6 and 1.7 show some of the ecological variation found over Mesoamerica ranging from mangrove swamps along the Pacific coast near Xoconochco to thorn forests in the Tehuacan Valley.

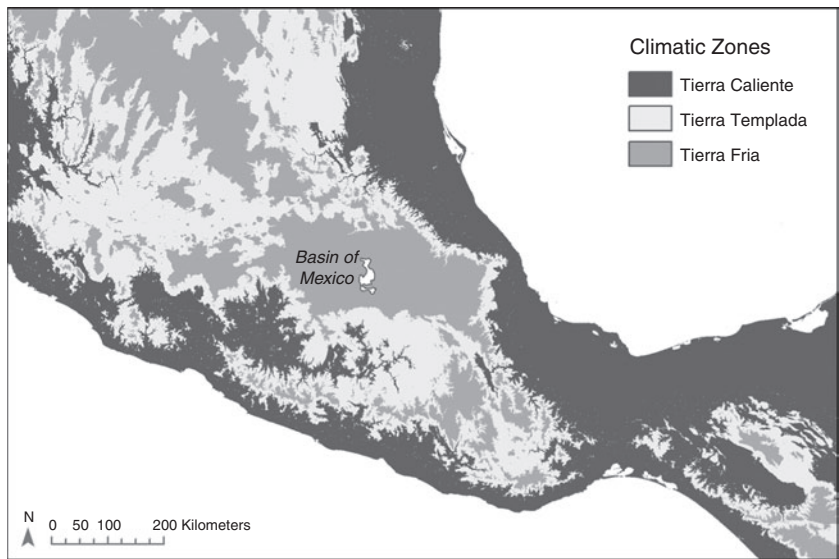


FIGURE 1.5 Climatic zones in Mesoamerica



FIGURE 1.6 Mangrove swamp along the Pacific coast of Xoconochco

What is important about western Mesoamerican cultural geography is that every area within this region is within 90 km of a different resource zone. This was significant for prehispanic trade because it meant that the vast majority of indigenous communities across this area were located

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FIGURE 1.7 Thorn Forest in the Tehuacan Valley, Puebla, Mexico

within 1–3 *jornadas*, a normal day's walking journey of 30 km, to a different ecological zone from the one they lived in.⁵ This sharp juxtaposition of environmental resources was succinctly summarized by Francisco Hernández in the middle sixteenth century where he states,

It is amazing that in a distance of as little as three miles one encounters so many variations in temperature: here you freeze and there you boil, not because of the weather, but because of the topography of the valleys . . . All of this means that these areas produce two harvests a year, nearly three, because at the time that one is extremely cold, another is predominantly hot

(Varey 2000:73).

Figure 1.8 illustrates the portion of western Mesoamerica that is within 30 km of another resource zone of at least 1 sq. km in size. This figure shows that if settlements were randomly distributed across Central Mexico, fully 86.6% of all towns and villages would be within one day's walk or less from another major resource zone (Hirth 2013b). The percentage actually is much higher since the Basin of Mexico and the adjoining areas of the valleys of Toluca and Puebla-Tlaxcala were studded with small fresh water lakes and/or seasonal marshes that provided their own unique set of exploitable waterfowl, fish, and insect resources

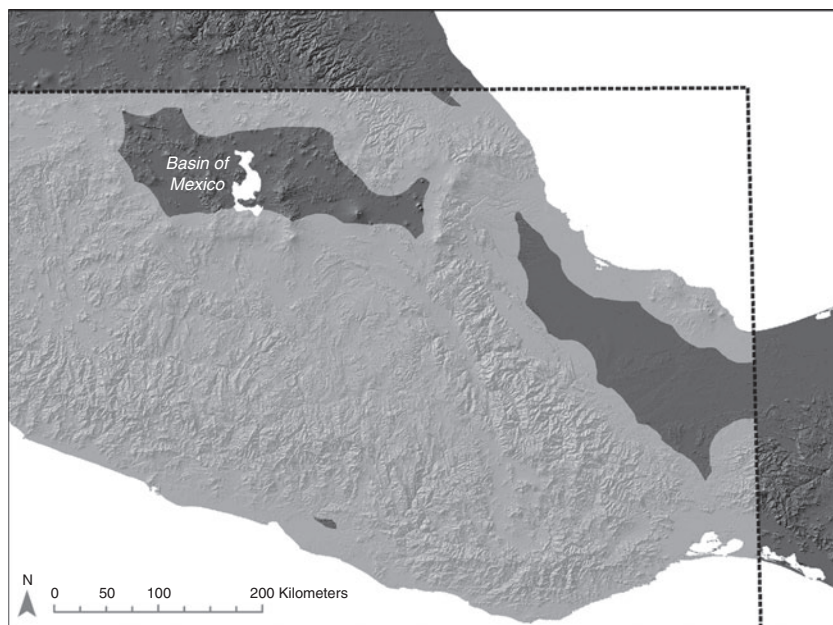


FIGURE 1.8 Areas of the Mexican highlands within 30 km of another ecological interface

(e.g. Parsons 1996, 2001, 2008) that added to regional resource diversity.⁶ When these highland lacustrine zones are taken into account virtually all of the western highlands is within a normal day's journey of a different resource zone.

Archaeologists and historians have long recognized that resource diversity was an engine behind trade and commerce (Braudel 1986). William Sanders (1956, 1962; Sanders and Price 1968) was one of the first investigators to argue for the importance of ecological diversity in stimulating economic interaction throughout Central Mexico. While Sanders was concerned with the origin of political complexity, he recognized that economic diversity stimulated economic interaction at multiple levels.⁷ The close spacing of different resource zones, and the desire for the different resources and agricultural products available from them, led to a high degree of symbiotic interaction between communities and households located in different ecological zones.

This close juxtaposition of different resources meant that different zones could be exploited by households without much difficulty. It created multiple intersecting distribution spheres that moved different resources

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over distances of 20–40 km. This is the distance range that commoner households could easily navigate to engage in trade. Differences in elevation and variable rainfall patterns created different agricultural cycles and levels of crop risk across the highlands. Exchange was one way to mediate these risks and to provision households with resources they did not produce. A review of indigenous trade during the sixteenth century reveals that the movement and trade of perishable and imperishable commodities was commonplace over distances of 50–150 km (Hirth 2013b).

The dissected highland topography created a landscape of small polities with strong local ethnic identities that fiercely sought to maintain their independence from one another. This makes discussing general economic practices across the Aztec economic world challenging because it requires generalizing about groups that saw themselves as unique and ethnically distinct. This is complicated by the fact that the largest body of historic information comes from the Basin of Mexico which was the center of the Aztec empire. The marketplace was the central economic institution in all highland societies which enabled all individuals to be involved in commerce to differing degrees. Nevertheless, many of the same economic structures were shared by Tarascan groups to the west, and Maya groups to the east. Juan de Grijalva's initial exploration of the coast of Mexico in 1517 reported bustling markets, port towns, and wealthy merchants along the entire Gulf Coast all the way to Yucatán (Bernal Díaz 1956:6). In one case the Spanish referred to the town of Ecab in northeastern Yucatán as the "Great Cairo" because of its size and apparent commercial prosperity.⁸

Ancient Mexico possessed a rich commercial economy that in the early sixteenth century was as complex as any the Spanish had seen in the Mediterranean world. Understanding the structure of this economy is important for the comparative study of ancient economic systems because it developed under a different set of conditions than those in the Old World. One of its most distinctive differences is that it lacked an effective system of transportation (Hassig 1985). The precolumbian societies of ancient Mexico did not have wheeled vehicles, beasts of burden, or a system of large-scale maritime commerce like that found in the Old World. All the goods moving across the Mexican and Guatemalan highlands were carried on the backs of human porters (*tlameme*) (Figure 1.9). Elsewhere small dugout canoes were important for moving goods across freshwater lakes and along navigable rivers (Figure 1.10). Lake transportation was very important in the economic integration of the Basin of Mexico. Canoes moved agricultural goods from different areas of the lake